

JESUS, KING OF ISRAEL

*Toward a Final Quest
For the Historical Jesus*

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Chapter One

The Puzzle of Mark 16.8 and John 21

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The Puzzle of Mark 16.8 and John 21

The earliest ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end abruptly in mid-thought at 16.8, without the predicted reunion of Jesus with his disciples in Galilee. Meanwhile, John 21, an appendix to the Gospel of John, features an unexpected “additional” reunion of Jesus with his disciples in Galilee. The objective of this chapter is to draw attention to extensive literary correlations between the structure of Mark and the narrative in John 21 that make it appear as if the peculiar endings of these two gospels are related literary phenomena.

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Among the most startling textual oddities of the NT gospels is the abrupt ending of the *Gospel of Mark* at 16.8, where the startled women flee in fear from the empty tomb. Despite being instructed by the “young man” in the tomb to alert the disciples that the Lord has risen, the women say nothing to anyone. The gospel ends unexpectedly on a grim note of fear and apparent disobedience. The post-resurrection reunion in Galilee predicted by Jesus in Mark 14.28 never materializes. Moreover, the earliest ancient manuscripts of the *Gospel of Mark* end in mid-thought on the word *gar* (*for*), which is a grammatical rarity in Greek literature. In practical terms, the anticipated final scene in which the risen Lord is expected to reunite with his disciples in Galilee appears to be missing.¹

¹ The earliest and best manuscripts of the *Gospel of Mark* end at 16.8. The text which follows in all translations of the Bible, Mark 16.9–20, is widely considered by scholars to be a second century interpolation added by a redactor who wanted the gospel to end more conventionally with an anticipated resurrection appearance. Three variant shorter endings also appear in later manuscripts.

Oddly enough, precisely the opposite textual anomaly is found at the end of the *Gospel of John*. This gospel comes to a natural literary conclusion at the end of ch. 20:

20.30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

If nothing had followed these verses, readers would have no difficulty recognizing 20.30–31 as the natural and intended conclusion of the gospel. However, this formal conclusion is followed by one more chapter, John 21, which is an unexpected *extra* ending that makes little sense as a continuation of the gospel. For in the first twenty chapters of the *Gospel of John*, the disciples are never identified as fishermen. They have just seen the risen Lord twice in John 20. But inexplicably, in John 21, a group of these disciples who have never had any previous direct interaction with one another in the gospel, decide to embark upon a 120-mile journey to Galilee to try their hand at commercial fishing. By any measure, the notion that the disciples' response to having just seen the resurrected Lord would have been to go fishing in Galilee is absurd. The story in John 21 makes no practical sense as a continuation of the narrative in the *Gospel of John*. Yet there is no attempt by the editor of John 21 to explain why the disciples would have made such a strange move.

Therefore, the *Gospel of Mark* and the *Gospel of John* both feature bizarre and unexpected endings that leave the reader somewhat mystified. Yet the intrigue is compounded by the fact that John's extra ending in ch. 21 looks suspiciously like the story that we would have expected to find at the end of Mark beyond 16.8. For at the end of Mark, one anticipates the *first* resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples to occur in Galilee (per Mk 14.28, 16.7), while John 21 appears to tell the story of a *first* resurrection appearance to the disciples in Galilee. Though the editor of John 21 claims in 21.14 that this encounter by the sea is Jesus' third appearance to these disciples (after the two in ch. 20), Johannine scholars have long recognized that the story in John 21 was originally composed as a first reunion appearance:

Raymond Brown: Most commentators interpret the threefold question about Peter's love for Jesus in [21:]15–17 as a rehabilitation of Peter after his threefold denial, and such a rehabilitation would logically have taken place on the occasion of the **first post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to Peter, which is what we seem to have in 21.1–14.**²

C.K. Barrett: Moreover, **the present narrative [John 21] looks more like a first than a third appearance...**The impression is given that the present story does not belong to the carefully composed narrative of Ch. 20 but is a distinct incident drawn from another source...³

Rudolf Bultmann: It is apparent that the narrative of 21.1–14 was **originally related as the first Easter story;** the editorial v. 14 shows that the story was set only subsequently in the place that it now occupies.⁴

Therefore, Mark's missing ending beyond 16.8 and John's extra ending in ch. 21 both relate to Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance in Galilee. Accordingly, the casual reader's first thought might be to wonder whether the original ending of Mark was lost from Mark, then edited and attached to John in the form of its odd appendix? But for NT scholars, this is a practical impossibility. Under conventional academic theory there is little chance that these could be related literary phenomena, for there would seem to be no conceivable circumstance under which an ending of Mark could have become detached from Mark, either accidentally or intentionally, and subsequently edited and appended to John. Most scholars would consider the notion ludicrous.

Many scholars indeed have argued that, despite appearances, there really is no missing ending of the *Gospel of Mark*. Under this theory, the author intentionally ended his gospel abruptly at 16.8 for socio-political or theological reasons. Some have suggested that to end on a note of fear was intended to validate the community's sense of fear and terror that they were experiencing at the time under violent Roman persecution. In this case, the author was attempting to assure readers that fear was an unfortunate but necessary consequence of belief. Some scholars have argued that the lack of an expected ending is intended to encourage readers/hearers of the gospel to finish the story in their own lives. Modern scholars have been able to propose

² Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John*, Doubleday, 1970, 1083.

³ Barrett, C.K., *The Gospel According to John*, Second Ed., Westminster, 1978, 582–83

⁴ Bultmann, Rudolf, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Westminster, 1971, 701

a variety of creative explanations for why Mark may have decided to end abruptly at 16.8, and for many they constitute satisfactory explanations for the abrupt truncation of Mark.

Nevertheless, despite the academy's overwhelming consensus that the author intended to end at 16.8, there are a surprising number of detailed structural parallels between the *Gospel of Mark* and John 21 that are difficult to explain under conventional academic theory. My objective in this chapter is to illustrate the array of literary parallels between these texts. Collectively, they tend to suggest that there must have been some sort of direct literary relationship that scholars have yet to acknowledge or address. These parallels are most easily explained by supposing that the author of Mark did in fact compose a continuing narrative beyond 16.8 which featured the reunion predicted in Mark 14.28, and that essential components of this original ending beyond 16.8 have been preserved, to some greater or lesser degree, in John 21 under circumstances unknown. Here I intend to illustrate the magnitude of the problem, which is that so many precise literary parallels exist between the abrupt ending of *Gospel of Mark* and John 21 that it is difficult to avoid the inference that they must be related literary phenomena.

A Key to the Puzzle: The *Gospel of Peter*

If the author of Mark were to have written a conclusion to his narrative beyond 16.8 that is now lost, the failure of the women to alert the disciples in 16.8 suggests that, in the next scene, the disciples would have been unaware of the empty tomb, presumably grieving and in shock at the unexpected turn of events. They would still have been in Jerusalem, as indicated in 16.7. Since in Mark 14.28, Jesus makes it clear that the first reunion with the disciples would be in Galilee, the author of Mark would have required a narrative device by which to relocate the disciples to Galilee. Of utmost curiosity, this narrative device is described explicitly in the *Gospel of Peter*. For in the *Gospel of Peter* as in the *Gospel of Mark*, (and contra Matthew, Luke, and John), the women also flee from the tomb in fear and say nothing to anyone:

50 Since Mary Magdalene, the disciple of the Lord, was afraid of the Jews who were inflamed with anger, she had not done what women usually do at the tombs of those who have died and are loved by them. At the dawn of the Lord's day, however, (51) she took her friends with her and went to the tomb where he had been put. (52) And they were afraid that the Jews might see. They said, "Even if we were not able to weep and mourn on

the day he was crucified, let us now do these things at his tomb. (53) But who will roll away the stone which was placed in the entrance for us, so that we can go in to him and do the things we should? (54) For the stone is great and we are afraid that someone might see us. And if we cannot go in, let us put what we brought in his memory at the entrance. Let us weep and mourn until we get to our houses."

55 When they arrived, they found that the tomb had been opened. And going in, they stooped over and there was a beautiful man sitting the middle of the tomb and he had an extremely bright robe wrapped around him. Whoever he was, he said to them, (56) "Why did you come? Whom are you seeking? Is it not the one who was crucified? He has risen and gone out. If you do not believe, however, bend down and look there at the place he lay because he is not there. For he has risen and gone out there, where he was sent." 57 Then, the terrified women fled.

58 It was the last day of the feast of the unleavened bread and many people were going out, returning to their houses since the festival was over. (59) But we, the twelve disciples of the Lord, were weeping and grieving, and although everyone was mourning because of what had happened, each departed for his own house. (60) **But I, Simon Peter, and my brother Andrew took our nets and went out to the sea.** And with us was **Levi, the son of Alphaeus**, whom the Lord [. . .]⁵

It is remarkable how closely the *Gospel of Peter* (GPet) parallels Mark 16.1–8 in this section. Though in the *Gospel of Mark* the women's fear of the "angry Jews" is not recorded as it is in GPet, these two gospels otherwise agree on a host of details, and they are notably in exclusive agreement on two key points, (1) there was one "man" sitting in the tomb (not two men standing per Luke, nor one angel per Matthew or two angels per John), and (2) the women fled in fear and said nothing to anyone (stated explicitly in Mark and implied in GPet). Mark ends abruptly at this point but the story in the surviving fragment of GPet continues with the scene that one might anticipate would have followed Mark 16.8—it is the first of the week, and the twelve are despondent at the turn of events. They are evidently unaware of the empty tomb, indicating that the women had not informed them of their discovery. As GPet continues, the disciples decide to return to their homes in defeat. Of particular note, Peter and Andrew return to their nets and go to sea, placing them back at the Sea of Galilee. And then come the intriguing final words of the surviving manuscript, "*And with us was Levi, the son of Alphaeus, whom the Lord ...*" This final phrase is easily overlooked. However, it is riveting, for in the entire panoply of NT and extra-canonical

⁵ Translation of *Gospel of Peter* by Andrew Bernhard, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelpeter-andrewbernhard.html>

Christian literature, there are only two known references to “*Levi, the son of Alphaeus.*” One is here at the end of the *Gospel of Peter*, the other is in Mark 2.14—he is the disciple *whom the Lord called from the tax office.*⁶ Accordingly, this reference further strengthens the literary affinity between the *Gospel of Mark* and the *Gospel of Peter* in this portion of the narrative. Since the women flee in fear and say nothing in both, and since the story in GPet is coherent as a continuing narrative beyond Mark 16.8, one may reasonably wonder whether the narrative in GPet may have been paralleling an original conclusion beyond Mark 16.8?

One thing is certain. The *Gospel of Peter* explicitly describes the narrative device that the author of Mark would have needed to relocate the disciples to Galilee—they are grieving and in despair, they are unaware of the empty tomb, the movement is over, there is nothing left to do but to return home. Peter and Andrew return to their nets. At this point they are ideally located for the predicted *first* resurrection appearance of Jesus in Galilee.

Yet, as we envision the disciples back on their fishing boats at the Sea of Galilee with a pending reunion they do not expect, one cannot help but recall the story in John 21. For if the disciples had returned to Galilee unaware of the empty tomb, they would not have expected to see Jesus by the shore. And this is evidently the case as the story unfolds in John 21. The disciples do not recognize Jesus by the shore in 21.4. They are also confused at his appearance in 21.12b, as if they did not expect to see him. These appear to be literary fragments of a “first reunion” story that the redactor has evidently drawn from an unknown source, for there is little chance that he would have made these suggestions in a narrative he was creating from scratch as a third appearance. Moreover, he has preserved them in a manner that undermines the coherence of his narrative, for he senses the need to clarify that this was his “third appearance” in 21.14. Yet these indications that the disciples did not expect to see Jesus would fit quite naturally in this story if it had originated as a continuing narrative beyond Mark 16.8, where the women had not alerted the disciples to the empty tomb. The obvious question then follows: Is there any evidence that additional units in John 21 might have been preserved from an original ending of Mark?

⁶ Luke 5.27 also refers to Levi, but Mark alone identifies him as the *son of Alphaeus.*

John 21 and the Literary Structure of Mark

John 21 does indeed contain several key elements which are tightly integrated into the literary structure of Mark, including the restoration of Peter to grace in 21.15–17, and the miraculous catch of 153 fish (21.11). However, to illustrate the literary relevance of these units to the *Gospel of Mark*, a review of the compositional structure of Mark is required.

The *Gospel of Mark* is composed in two halves. The first half introduces Jesus and the kingdom of God, and the second half addresses personal sacrifice and the need to take up one's cross to enter the kingdom of God. The two halves of the gospel meet at 8.22–8.30, where the healing of the blind man in 8.22–26 and Peter's Confession in 8.27–30 constitute a carefully constructed literary hinge that binds the two halves together. R.T. France figuratively describes 8.27–30 as a geographical "watershed," and 8.22–26 as the beginning of the "second act" of the work:

8.27–30 ... is conventionally said to be the watershed in Mark's narrative. // That watershed is symbolized by the geographical movement of the narrative, which begins at the most northerly point of Jesus' travels high among the mountains in 8.27, and from there moves relentlessly southward towards the denouement in Jerusalem. The second act of the drama, heralded by 8.22–26, effectively begins here.⁷

Each half of the *Gospel of Mark* is segmented into three sections, for a total of six sections. The boundaries of each of the six sections are defined by primary sets of literary brackets that act as parentheses. These bracketed pairs consist of repeating grammar or complementary themes. So, for example, Section Four opens with the healing of the blind man in 8.22–26 and closes with the healing of another blind man in 10.46–52. These two healings of the blind act as parentheses that define the boundaries of the section. In all but one case, there are two or more sets of complementary opening and closing brackets that form a structural chiasmus.⁸

A key observation is this: *The primary bracketed pairs that define section boundaries in Mark cause material in John 21 to appear to be inte-*

⁷ France, R.T., *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002, 327

⁸ A chiasmus is a literary construct that features an initial set of elements in the sequence A, B, and C..., which is eventually followed by the same or thematically similar elements in the reverse sequence C, B, and A. The chiasmus, also referred to as a chiasmic structure, constitutes parenthetical brackets that can be used to define discrete sections of text.

gral to the literary completion of Mark's Section Six. The fact that the author of Mark also uses multiple bracketed pairs in chiasmic form adds weight to the structural observations. Accordingly, we must review the section boundaries in sequence to illustrate the author's compositional technique. For ease of reference, the section divisions in the *Gospel of Mark* to be discussed below are summarized in Table 1.1:

Table 1.1: Section Divisions in the Gospel of Mark

Section	Chap/Verse	Primary Bracket	Secondary Bracket	Tertiary Bracket
1	1.1 to 3.12	1.1 Son of God 3.11–12 Son of God	1.5 Baptist crowds 3.7–8 Jesus crowds	1.21–28 Synagogue 3.1–6 Synagogue
2	3.13 to 6.13	3.13–19a Calling of Twelve 6.7–13 Sending of Twelve	3.19b–35 Home/family 6.1–3 Home/family	
3	6.14 to 8.30	6.14–15 Who is Jesus? 8.27–30 Who is Jesus?	6.31–45 Feeding of 5000 8.1–21 Feeding of 4000	
4	8.22 to 10.52	8.22–26 Heal blind man 10.46–52 Heal Bartimaeus	8.31 Son of man dies 10.45 Son of man gives his life	8.32–33 Rebuke of Peter 10.35– 44Rebuke of James & John
5	11.1 to 14.26	11.1 Mt of Olives 14.26 Mt of Olives	11.1–2 Sending two 14.13 Sending two	
6	14.27 to 16.8	14.27–28 Reunion in Galilee 16.7 Reunion in Galilee		

Note that at each section boundary the closing primary bracket of each section is followed immediately by the opening primary bracket of the next, such that they always abut one another. There is one notable exception—the brackets at the junction of the halfway point, the “literary hinge” adjoining

the two halves of the gospel, appear in reverse order. They still abut one another, but the opening of Section 4 at 8.22–26 *precedes* the close of Section 3 at 8.27–30. This reversal of order was likely intentional as will be discussed below.

Section One: 1.1 to 3.11–12

Markan commentators often interpret several of the opening verses in ch. 1 as prologue material rather than being integral to the first major section of the gospel. There is also uncertainty as to whether the opening *seven* words in 1.1 should be viewed as an independent title, perhaps added later, rather than text that was integral to the original composition. These points of confusion tend to cause analysts to overlook what appears to be the author's intentionally constructed opening chiasmus. The author of Mark appears to have opened Section One at 1.1 and ended at 3.11–12, with a set of primary brackets identifying Jesus as *Son of God*. By way of confirmation, there are two secondary sets of brackets inside these primary *Son of God* brackets that form a chiasmic structure. One is the commentary on the crowds drawn by John and Jesus respectively. In 1.5, the Baptist draws crowds from *Judea and Jerusalem*, but in 3.7–8 Jesus attracts a great multitude not only from *Judea and Jerusalem*, but from a much wider geography. This counterpoint appears to be intentional, as is the structural placement of these complementary claims just inside the two references to *Son of God*.

1.1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, *the Son of God*.

1.5 And there went out to [John the baptizer] all the country of **Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem**; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

1.21–28 **Exorcism in the synagogue**

3.1–6 **Healing in the synagogue**

3.7–8 Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a **great multitude from Galilee followed; also from Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from about Tyre and Sidon** a great multitude...

3.11 And whenever the unclean spirits beheld him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are *the Son of God*." 12 And he strictly ordered them not to make him known.

Set just inside the two “crowd size” citations are two synagogue pericopes, which form a third set of brackets. Matthew D. C. Larsen has proposed that the *Gospel of Mark* is structured around five large collections of thematically arranged notes. He argues that the first of these five collections is bounded by these two synagogue pericopes at 1.21–28 and 3.1–6 in bracketed form.⁹ I believe Larsen is correct that these synagogue pericopes do indeed constitute a deliberately constructed parenthetical bracketed pair. However, it is important to take note of the two additional sets of brackets outside these synagogue healings, and thus the author’s intended chiasmic structure. In short, once one recognizes the closing boundary of Section One at 3.11–12, the multiple-bracket chiasmus outlined above comes into view. This structure becomes more apparent as intentional literary design once we begin to observe the author’s apparent use of multiple brackets in similar chiasmic structure at each section boundary.

Section Two: 3.13 to 6.13

As noted in Table 1.1 above, the primary brackets that define section boundaries in the *Gospel of Mark* always abut one another. Thus, as Section One closes at 3.11–12, the opening bracket of Section Two is found in the verses that immediately follow, 3.13–15. There is a scene change at this point where Jesus goes up on a mountain to call the twelve. And in 3.13–15 there are four specific ideas—(a) Jesus *calls* those whom he desires, (b) he appoints *twelve*, (c) they are to be *sent out to preach*, and (d) they will have authority to *cast out demons*. All of these elements are repeated in 6.7–13, where Jesus calls the twelve, he sends them out (6.7), they went out and preached (6.12), and they cast out demons (6.13). So, 3.13–15 and 6.7–13 appear to be crafted as thematically related opening and closing brackets.

A secondary pair of brackets in Section Two becomes visible once 3.13–15 and 6.7–13 are interpreted as primary brackets. After calling the twelve which continues through 3.19a, Jesus goes *home*; as he is teaching, his mother and brothers come out to seize him out of concern for his mental health (3.21). He ultimately declares that those who follow the will of God are his true *mother, brothers, and sisters* (3.35). At the end of Section Two, just prior to the sending of the twelve in 6.7, Jesus returns to his *home* country (6.1). As he is teaching, the people become offended at him because they

⁹ Larsen, Matthew D.C., *Gospels Before the Book*, Oxford University Press, 2018, 129)

claim to know his *mother, brothers, and sisters* (6.3). It does not appear to be accidental that these two references occur just after the calling of the twelve in 3.13–19a and just prior to the sending of the twelve in 6.7–13. If they were placed in these locations intentionally, they would constitute secondary bracketing that defines Section Two. Therefore, this section appears to contain two bracketed sets in chiasmic form similar to that in Section One:

Mark 3.13 And he went up on the mountain and **called to him those whom he desired**; and they came to him. 14 **And he appointed twelve**, to be with him, and **to be sent out to preach** 15 and have **authority to cast out demons**. [The twelve named in 16–19a]

Mark 3.19b **Then he went home**; 20 and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21 **And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him**, for people were saying, "He is beside himself." // 31 And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. 32 And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, "**Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you.**" 33 **And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"** 34 And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "**Here are my mother and my brothers!** 35 **Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.**"

Mark 6.1 He went away from there **and came to his own country**; and his disciples followed him. 2 And on the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! 3 **Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"** And they took offense at him.

Mark 6.7–13 **And he called to him the twelve**, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them **authority over the unclean spirits...** 12 **So they went out and preached** that men should repent. 13 **And they cast out many demons** and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.

There is understandable confusion among Markan specialists as to where this section is intended to end. In Larsen's interpretation of the *Gospel of Mark*, the second of what he considers to be five collections of notes is defined by the calling and sending of the twelve, which is consistent with what I observe as the primary bracketing of Section Two. However, Larsen

believes the section extends to 6.30 rather than 6.13.¹⁰ The problem is that the material in 6.16–29, the beheading of the Baptist at Herod's party, has nothing to do with the calling or sending of the twelve. The last verse in this sequence, 6.30, is a jarring *non sequitur* that does not follow easily after 6.29. It does indeed refer back to the mission of the twelve, but it is unrelated to the Herod/Baptist pericope. It could, in theory, serve as the closing bracket of Section Two, were it not for the fact that the highly distinctive material in 6.14–15 is repeated in 8.27–30, thereby creating a primary bracketed pair that defines Section Three.

Section Three: 6.14–15 to 8.27–30

Since the author appears to construct sections boundaries where the outer primary brackets abut one another, if Section Two ends at 6.12–13, we should anticipate an opening bracket of Section Three in 6.14–15. These verses focus on the identity of Jesus—some say he is John the baptizer, some say Elijah, others believe he is some other prophet. Notably, these three possibilities are repeated in the same order when Jesus asks *Who do men say that I am?* in 8.27–30:

6.14 King Herod heard of it; **for Jesus' name had become known.** Some said, "**John the baptizer** has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "**It is Elijah.**" And others said, "**It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.**"

8.27 And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "**Who do men say that I am?**" 28 And they told him, "**John the Baptist;** and others say, **Elijah;** and others **one of the prophets.**" 29 And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." 30 And he charged them to tell no one about him.

Therefore, 8.27–30 refers directly back to 6.14–15. So as anticipated, these two passages function as primary brackets that define Section Three. Moreover, at 8.27–30 we have arrived at the halfway point in Mark. The healing of the blind man in 8.22–26 and Peter's Confession in 8.27–30 constitute the literary hinge between the two halves of the gospel. Thus, the closing bracket

¹⁰ Larsen, 129

of Section Three coincides with the halfway point that divides the two halves of the work. The author's deliberate compositional precision is apparent.

Section Three contains the mass feedings of the Five Thousand and Four Thousand. Again, Matthew Larsen recognizes the two mass feedings as a bracketed pair that defines the third collection of notes. I agree once again that these two feedings are a bracketed pair, yet in my view, these units are placed near the beginning and end of this section as secondary brackets nested within the primary bracketing of 6.14–15 and 8.27–30. In other words, they indicate that the author had another chiastic structure in mind. Nevertheless, at this point, the text presents two anomalies that do not fit the anticipated pattern. Neither the Herod/Baptist beheading in 6.16–29 nor the healing of the blind man in 8.22–26 fit the anticipated structure:

6.14 King Herod heard of it; **for Jesus' name had become known.** Some said, "**John the baptizer** has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "**It is Elijah.**" And others said, "**It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.**"

(6.16–29 Herod party / Baptist beheaded)

6.31–45 The Feeding of the Five Thousand

8.1–21 The Feeding of the Four Thousand

(8.22–26 Blind man healed)

8.27 And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "**Who do men say that I am?**" 28 And they told him, "**John the Baptist;** and others say, **Elijah;** and others **one of the prophets.**" 29 And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "**You are the Christ.**" 30 And he charged them to tell no one about him.

The material that follows 6.14–15 and precedes the Feeding of the Five Thousand is the peculiar melodrama of Herod delivering the Baptist's head on a platter (6.16–29). This pericope has no parallel near the end of Section Three, nor is it relevant to the calling/sending of the twelve in Section Two. Furthermore, the healing of the blind man in 8.22–26 has no parallel near the beginning of Section Three. The Baptist's beheading and the healing of the blind man are not related to each other in any apparent way. So the chiastic structure we might anticipate is present in (a) the two discussions of the identity of Jesus in 6.14–15 and 8.27–30, and (b) the two mass feedings,

but it is compromised at both ends of the section. Why would the author have constructed two sets of bracketed material in chiasmic form, then inserted two unrelated stories between the two on both ends to disturb the structure? A clue to the resolution of these anomalies becomes apparent after a consideration of the structure of Section Four.

Section Four: 8.22–26 to 10.46–52

Markan specialists routinely recognize the healings of the blind man in 8.22–26 and blind Bartimaeus in 10.46–52 as brackets defining a discrete section. Larsen cites them as the brackets identifying what he sees as the fourth collection of notes.¹¹ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon cites 8.22–10.52 bounded by the two healings of the blind as “*the* central section of the gospel.”¹² I likewise agree that these two pericopes function as primary brackets defining Section Four. However, as just noted, the opening bracket of Section Four in 8.22–26 unexpectedly *precedes* the closing bracket of Section Three, Peter’s Confession in 8.27–30; they abut one another but in reverse order. At every other section boundary, the closing bracket of one section is *followed* immediately by the opening bracket of the next section. Thus, from a structural perspective, the healing of the blind man should follow Peter’s Confession. This confusion occurs at the literary hinge, the junction of the two halves of the gospel.

Assuming this reversal of order in the healing of the blind man and Peter’s Confession was intentional, the author appears to have figuratively interlinked the two halves of the gospel, creating the “literary hinge” that makes it difficult to separate them. Why would he have done this? A bit of speculation is required to read the author’s mind (always a dicey proposition), but he may be attempting to establish that the two halves of the gospel are inexorably linked—they are two parts of an integrated whole that cannot be separated—one cannot follow Jesus and partake of the kingdom revealed in the first half of the gospel without taking up one’s cross and accepting the personal sacrifice demanded in the second half. If this is the author’s intended meaning, it is subtle but profound.

That the reversal of these brackets was intentional can be demonstrated by reading them in their expected order. For when 8.22–26 and 8.27–

¹¹ Larsen, 129)

¹² Malbon, Elizabeth Strothers, *Mark’s Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology*, Baylor University Press, 2009, 30-33)

30 are reversed in order, then 8.31 follows immediately after 8.22–26, and Section Four suddenly resolves clearly with three bracketed pairs in chiasmic structural form:

- 8.22–26 Healing of the blind man
- 8.31 The Son of man must suffer and die
 - 8.32–33 The rebuke of Peter
 - 10.35–44 The rebuke of James and John
- 10.45 The Son of man will give his life
- 10.46–52 The healing of the blind Bartimaeus

In like manner, when 8.22–26 and 8.27–30 are reversed in order, the question of Jesus' identity in 8.27–30 follows immediately after the interpretation of the mass feedings in 8.17–21, which is where it should be. So all of the apparent structural confusion at the end of Section Three and the opening of Section Four is resolved by assuming that the author has intentionally reversed the order of the two brackets at the literary hinge.

Since the end of Section Three and the opening of Section Four resolve cleanly by recognizing the reversal of order at the junction, the only remaining unresolved incongruity in the compositional pattern is the pericope of the Baptist's beheading (6.16–29), which stands out as a glaring irregularity. Not only does it not fit structurally, but it is also a melodramatic vignette that disturbs the author's otherwise methodical presentation of Jesus and the kingdom of God. The author of Mark certainly does embrace melodrama on other occasions, but this story is extreme in that it crosses the line into theater of the absurd with the Baptist's severed head being served on a platter. Luke eliminates this pericope entirely, suggesting either that it may not have been in his copy of Mark, or that he thought it objectionable and omitted it. Matthew sees 6.16–29 in his Markan source and epitomizes it, compressing it into little more than half the verbiage.

Notice that the opening verse of this pericope in 6.16 is a redundant restatement of 6.14, which appears as if it could be an editor's attempt to divert the preexisting narrative into an interpolated side commentary:

6.14 **King Herod heard of it;** for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "**John the baptizer has been raised from the dead;** that is why these powers are at work in him."

6.16 **But when Herod heard of it** he said, "**John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.**"¹⁷ For Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because he had married her.

The purpose of this story is to establish that John had not been executed by Herod for political reasons as a perceived threat to social stability. Rather, he was executed due to the spiteful revenge of an offended woman, despite Herod's favorable impression of John. It would not be a surprise to discover that a redactor was motivated to depoliticize the figure of John given that the gospel represents him as a forerunner to Jesus.

Furthermore, the apostles' return to Jesus in 6.30 is an abrupt return to the previous storyline that reflects no awareness of, or reaction to, the execution of John. It seems unlikely that a single author writing this as a continuous narrative would have changed the subject so abruptly in 6.30 after having recounted the serving of John's head on a platter and his burial.

Therefore, one may wish to consider that 6.16–29 may not have been planned as part of the original composition. If 6.16–29 is lifted out, the remaining narrative reads with improved logical continuity; 6.30 no longer appears jarring as a comment following 6.15. Furthermore, the anticipated chiasmic bracketing comes into view. Section Three is defined by the two reflections on the identity of Jesus in 6.14–15 and 8.27–30, but with the removal of 6.16–29, these outer brackets are reinforced by the complementary bracketing of the two mass feedings in chiasmic form. So it is not unreasonable to suspect that this Herod/John pericope may have been inserted by someone other than the original author, for it is the only unit in Mark that appears to compromise the author's section-defining chiasmic structures, and is thus a unique anomaly.

Section Five: 11.1 to 14.26

Section Five begins immediately after the healing of blind Bartimaeus with the arrival at the Mount of Olives in 11.1. It concludes with Jesus' return to the Mount of Olives in 14.26. Two key textual features confirm this. First, there are only two occasions in the *Gospel of Mark* in which Jesus sends two unnamed disciples to perform specific tasks. These occur at the beginning of Section Five in 11.1–7 where two are sent to secure the colt in preparation for the Triumphal Entry, and again at the end of Section Five in 14.13–16,

where two are sent to prepare the Passover meal. In both cases, Jesus provides guidance on how these two disciples are to respond to circumstances they will encounter. So the two references to the Mount of Olives in 11.1 and 14.26 define the boundaries of Section Five, and the two vignettes in which two unidentified disciples are sent on their respective tasks represent complementary bracketing:

11.1 And when they drew near to Jerusalem to Bethphage and Bethany, **at the Mount of Olives,**

he sent two of his disciples, 2 and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat; untie it and bring it.

14.13 **And he sent two of his disciples, and said to them, "Go into the city,** and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him,

14.26 And when they had sung a hymn, they went out **to the Mount of Olives.**

Furthermore, the return to Mount of Olives in 14.26 is confirmed as the close of Section Five by the text that immediately follows, in which Jesus declares, "*after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee*" (14.28). This promise is repeated in the closing command of the young man in the tomb, "*But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.*" (16.7). This explicit referral back to Jesus' promise of a reunion in Galilee in 14.28 constitutes a bracketed pair which appears to define the boundaries of Section Six. Consistent with previously observed form, the closing bracket of Section Five, the return to Mount of Olives in 14.26, is followed immediately by the opening bracket of Section Six in 14.27–28.

Therefore, the last third of the gospel has been segmented into two sections: Section Five is Jesus' time/mission in Jerusalem, and Section Six is the passion sequence. The six sections in Mark are each defined by opening and closing primary brackets that adjoin one another, for a total of *twelve* boundary-defining structural elements.¹³ In the first five sections, the primary

¹³ As an aside, it is intriguing to contemplate that the author's oddly specific reference to the twelve being sent on their mission by Jesus in six groups of two (Mark 6.7) may have been

brackets appear to have been reinforced by one or two sets of supplemental brackets in chiasmic form. These complementary structures serve to confirm the identification of the primary section boundaries. Section Six is the only section that does not contain any hint of secondary chiasmic bracketing. This anomaly will be explored further below.

A Closer Look at Section Six

The review thus far indicates that the *Gospel of Mark* ends with a formally structured Section Six defined by primary brackets at 14.28 and 16.7. This reflects purposeful literary design. There are two possible explanations for this—either the author of Mark intended to end the gospel at 16.7, or a redactor has inserted a closing bracket at 16.7 to *make it appear* as if the gospel was intended to end at this point. Since deliberate editorial activity is at hand under either scenario, we can safely dismiss other theories that the abrupt ending at 16.8 may have been unintended due either to the author’s untimely incapacitation or to accidental damage to the autograph or other early manuscript.

Though 16.7 appears to be a formally structured closing unit, we are still left hanging with the women fleeing in fear and remaining silent in 16.8. And seemingly, unnecessarily so. The author or redactor has just finished Section Six with an enthusiastic, upbeat formal closing bracket in 16.7, joyfully affirming Jesus’ promise in 14.28. If the author had simply omitted 16.8 and ended at 16.7, there would never have been any question that this was the intended end of the gospel. Yet 16.8 nullifies the positive conclusion and ends the gospel not only on a dour note of fear, but of disobedience. In addition, 16.8 ends in mid-thought on the phrase *ephobounto gar*, an ending so grammatically rare as to guarantee the bewildered reader will wonder, “*where is the rest of the story?*” It is suspicious that the author would have followed the enthusiastic affirmation in 16.7 with the dire negativity of 16.8. And if 16.7 is lifted out, the remaining text reads with more logical coherence—fear and shock are understandable reactions to the women’s experience at the tomb, but there is no disobedience since they have not been directed to inform the disciples.

intended as a subtle allusion to the literary structure of the gospel. This detail is omitted by both Matthew and Luke.

Yet, this is precisely how the parallel account reads in the *Gospel of Peter*—here the women flee in terror, but they are *not* instructed to inform the disciples of their discovery. Therefore, the element of disobedience does not exist in the *Gospel of Peter*. This in turn suggests the possibility that Mark's original text may not have contained 16.7. Has a redactor inserted 16.7 as a substitute closing bracket to make it appear as if the gospel was intended to end at this point? This is speculative of course, but we will return to this question below as it relates specifically to John 21.

Is the original ending of Mark located in John 21?

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, John 21 opens with a bizarre proposition—an unlikely group of disciples decide to take up fishing in Galilee for no apparent reason, after having just seen the risen Lord in Jerusalem. This makes no sense as a continuation of the story in John 20 for a host of reasons. Simon Peter, Thomas, and Nathanael have had no prior relationship or interaction with one another in the *Gospel of John*. They have never been identified as fishermen. So after having just encountered the risen Jesus, why would they suddenly decide at this moment to undertake a 120-mile journey to Galilee to try their hand at commercial fishing? Beyond this, the list in 21.2 mentions “those of Zebedee” as being in the group, evidently in reference to the two sons James and John who are never mentioned in John 1–20. None of this makes any coherent sense as a continuation of the *Gospel of John*.

However, if we set aside the obvious Johannine accommodations in John 21, this narrative *is* coherent as a continuation of Mark beyond 16.8, where the disciples have not been informed of the empty tomb—they return to their homes and fishing boats precisely because it is the only practical thing to do, as reported in the *Gospel of Peter*. Now, *if* the redactor of John 21 was drawing from an account originally composed by Mark as his conclusion beyond 16.8, the monumental question would be whether he copied over any evidence of an original closing bracket to Section Six? And indeed, there is a unit in John 21 that functions with remarkable precision as an original closing bracket. It is found in John 21.15–17:

21.15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." 16 A second

time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

In what ways is John 21.15–17 a structural closing bracket to Mark's Section Six? Notice that in Mark 14.27–30, the opening of Section Six, there are five tightly woven concepts: (1) the shepherd is struck down, (2) the sheep will scatter, (3) the risen Jesus will reunite with the disciples for the first time in Galilee, (4) Peter declares that his allegiance to Jesus is superior to that of the other disciples, and (5) Peter will deny Jesus three times. In John 21.15–17, *all five of these elements* are resolved in an equally well-integrated composition. At the outset, we recognize that this account in John 21 was originally composed as a first post-resurrection appearance and that it was edited for appending to John, as many scholars have noted. So this appearance of Jesus in John 21 is consistent with the initial reunion in Galilee promised in Mark 14.28.

Furthermore, in John 21.15–17 Jesus restores Peter to grace in three-fold fashion, which resolves the three denials predicted in Mark 14.30. This is an expected literary resolution. But in addition, note Jesus' first of the three questions to Peter, "Do you love me *more than these?*" where "these" refers to the other disciples standing by. This is an extremely jarring question at the end of John. It addresses Peter's relative allegiance to Jesus compared to the other disciples. As an appendix to John, it makes little sense. However, as a finale to Mark it is perfectly coherent—it challenges Peter's blustering proclamation of superior commitment to Jesus in Mark 14.29: "*even though they all fall away, I will not.*" There is no similar claim by Peter in John 1–20. The literary correlation between Mark 14.29 and John 21.15 is evident.

Jesus then instructs Peter three times to feed the sheep. Why is Peter assigned the role of a shepherd? As an appendix to the *Gospel of John*, scholars commonly assume that the shepherd metaphor in John 21 is intended to relate in some manner to the good shepherd language in John 10.1–18. However, when this is read as a finale to Mark, it becomes evident that Jesus is anointing Peter as the *new shepherd* of the movement to *replace the shepherd struck down* in 14.27. Peter is to feed the sheep that had scattered in 14.27. This precisely constructed closing bracket in John 21.15–17 becomes obvious once viewed in this light.

Therefore, when the narrative in John 21 is considered as a possible edited version of Mark's original conclusion beyond 16.8, the sequence in 21.15–17 functions with literary precision as a comprehensive resolution of all five distinct elements in Mark 14.27–30. Had this story followed Mark 16.8 as part of a continuing narrative, scholars would have already recognized it as an ingenious closing bracket of Section Six. Indeed, not only is it more comprehensive than 16.7, but from a structural perspective it reflects greater precision than does 14.28/16.7. Note the language “the shepherd is struck down and the sheep scatter” occurs in 14.27, so these two elements precede 14.28 and immediately about Jesus' return to Mount of Olives in 14.26. Thus, 14.27 constitutes a more precise placement of contiguous bracketing at the boundary between Sections Five and Six. If this does not reflect intentional literary design, it is a coincidence of astounding proportions.

On a final note, though Mark 14.28 and 16.7 function as paired brackets that define Section Six in the canonical text, there is no secondary set of brackets in chiasmic structure. The material following 14.27–30 is the Gethsemane scene in which Jesus is “exceedingly sorrowful” and distraught, praying that he might avoid his fate. There is no unit prior to 16.7 that suggests itself as a complementary bracket. Note, however, that the *Gospel of Peter* depicts the disciples grieving and mourning at the turn of events. Had this story paralleled Mark's continuing narrative beyond 16.8, the emotionally distraught disciples would have fit quite naturally as a complementary image to Jesus' traumatic suffering in Gethsemane. It is not difficult to imagine that the author would have structured this as a secondary nested pair of brackets. Indeed, one can easily imagine that the author of Mark would have been tempted to locate the grieving disciples once again in Gethsemane to strengthen the secondary bracketing. Therefore, a likely chiasmus defining the boundaries of the original Section Six becomes visible once the story in John 21 is appended to Mark, contributing further to the suspicion of intentional literary design.

Let us assume that the grieving disciples unaware of the empty tomb were in Mark's original scene that followed 16.8. If so, in transferring this narrative to the end of John, the notion that the disciples were grieving and mourning would need to have been edited out, for in John they have just seen the risen Lord in ch. 20. And indeed, it has been edited out. So a logical explanation is at hand for the fact that, in John 21, the disciples suddenly elect to go fishing in Galilee for no conceivable reason. Evidently the redactor was

either unable or unwilling to create a compelling substitute motive for their relocation to Galilee.

A Grand Seventh Frame

The author of Mark constructed the gospel in six discrete sections. Why not seven? *Twelve* and *seven* are both auspicious numbers in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and the author of Mark specifically draws attention to both *twelve* and *seven* as symbolic numbers of consequence (8.17–21). Given the author’s deliberate attention to *twelve* and *seven* in 8.17–21, it is intriguing to find that an overarching *seventh bracketed frame* in the gospel’s structure becomes visible once the narrative in John 21 is envisioned as the possible missing conclusion to the *Gospel of Mark*. It is related to the miraculous catch of 153 fish:

Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, *a hundred and fifty three of them*... (John 21.10–11)

What is the intended meaning of “153” fish? Though its derivation has been unclear to scholars, Rudolf Schnackenburg noted that “*the quantity of fish is justification for the supposition that the editors saw in it a symbol of universality.*”¹⁴ Surely, this is the case, for the catch of fish, in context, symbolizes the church. Yet a clue to the derivation of 153 may be found in Revelation (7.4, 14.1–3), where the *square of twelve* (144) is used as the key factor in 144,000, which also symbolizes the church. The difference between 153 and 144 is nine. One cannot avoid noticing that nine is the *square of three*, and that 153 is the sum of the squares of three and twelve. Why is this relevant? In Jewish and Christian tradition, *three* symbolizes God and the heavenly realm, and *twelve* often symbolizes God’s chosen people. Therefore, *153* appears to be a clever use of the Pythagorean theorem—the sum of squares is used to denote God in union with all souls redeemed. That the use of the Pythagorean theorem is relevant to Mark will be established in the next chapter, which will illustrate extensive numerological structures that are woven throughout the *Gospel of Mark*. Collectively, these structures will suggest that one of the author’s literary objectives was to engage with a educated Neopythagorean audience. Mark’s use of the Pythagorean theorem

¹⁴ Schnackenburg, Rudolf, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Crossroad, 1990, 3.358.

to denote the church at the end of his gospel would have been specifically relevant to this objective.

Where, then, is the seventh frame? It becomes visible when one recognizes that the disciples' catch of 153 fish would have functioned as the literary/symbolic fulfillment of Jesus' clarion call in Mark 1.17:

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "***Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.***" (Mark 1.16–17)

Notice that in canonical Mark through 16.8, Jesus' opening promise to make the disciples "*fishers of men*" is dropped, never to be mentioned again. Anton Chekov once advised that if one hangs a pistol on the wall in Act 1, the pistol must be fired by the third act. Yet in the canonical *Gospel of Mark*, the dramatic "*I will make you become fishers of men*" pistol is never fired. Why would this careful and methodical author have introduced such a riveting metaphor as the first proclamation spoken by Jesus to his disciples, only to ignore it throughout the rest of the gospel? The puzzle is resolved when the miraculous catch of 153 fish is restored to the end of Mark, for the author surely would have intended it to represent a fulfillment of Jesus' promise—*the disciples have indeed become fishers of men.*

Since Mark has used brackets to define six discrete sections with *twelve* primary elements defining the section boundaries, it is fascinating to find that a *seventh* frame encompassing the entire ministry of Jesus comes into view once the narrative in John 21 is viewed as a possible conclusion to Mark beyond 16.8. The author would, in essence, have woven the symbolic *twelve* and *seven* into the literary fabric of the gospel. And this is just the tip of the numerological iceberg in Mark, as will be discussed in Chapter Two.

Yet this is not the end of the story; there is another conspicuous literary link between Mark and John 21. In Mark 1.17, the first words spoken by Jesus to a disciple are "*Follow me.*" They are spoken to Peter and Andrew. The last words uttered by Jesus in John 21 are also "*Follow me!*" They are also spoken to Peter. And if Mark's original text had been paralleling the *Gospel of Peter*, Andrew would have been present as well. Is this another unlikely accident, or further evidence of literary design?

Quite notably, the grammar is different between the two. Mark 1.17 uses *deute opisō mou*, literally "come after me," although in context it could mean *follow me* as it is often translated. On the other hand, in John 21.19 and

22, the redactor uses *akolouthēi moi*, “follow me,” the same phrase used in the call of Philip (Jn 1.43). Since *deute opisō mou* is distinctive grammar in Mark 1.17 and not otherwise used in John, it appears the redactor may have adopted the Johannine grammar to eliminate an overtly glaring stylistic connection to Mark. One can only speculate as to whether the author of Mark would have used *deute opisō mou* in his original conclusion, although given the impressive precision of his bracketing, I suspect that he would not have missed the opportunity to finish the work with this distinctive closing frame.

Note that in the Markan context, this phrase *deute opisō mou* at the end of Mark would have had a double meaning. Not only would it have meant “follow me” as in “accept me as your leader and Lord.” It would also have meant “come after me” as in “take up my cause, it is now your turn to continue my work.” In Mark, Jesus came to unveil the kingdom of God which would grow like a mustard seed. The kingdom is the new fellowship of believers. If John 21 reflects the original culmination of the *Gospel of Mark*, the author’s objective would have been to proclaim that the resurrection is accomplished, victory is assured, and the kingdom will now continue to grow. The risen Lord reunites with the disciples and turns the reins over to Peter and the disciples. Peter as the new shepherd would continue to feed the sheep. Those who *come after him* will continue his work in growing the kingdom. The disciples are to *become fishers of men*.

Assuming Mark intended for “come after me” to stand at both ends of his gospel as the grand interpretive frame, they would stand just outside the references to the disciples becoming fishers of men and the miraculous catch. The original double-bracketed frame, in typical Markan chiasmic form, that defined the entire mission of Jesus would have been as follows:

A. The opening command of Jesus, “Come after me!”

B. *Disciples to be made “fishers of men”*

C. The Mission, Death and Resurrection of Jesus

B’. *Miraculous catch; disciples are made “fishers of men”*

A’. The closing command of Jesus, “Come after me!”

Follow (come after) me, and I will make you become fishers of men is the defining theme of the *Gospel of Mark*. If the redactor of John 21 had drawn from an original conclusion of Mark beyond 16.8, then the *Gospel of*

Mark ended on a victorious note in a resounding affirmation of its opening proclamation, “*The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*” (1.15). Therefore, one must consider that *Mark* may not have finished at 16.8 on a note of fear and disobedience. The original *Gospel of Mark*, with a dramatic conclusion paralleling the narratives in the *Gospel of Peter* and John 21, may have depicted the risen Lord reuniting with his disciples at the Sea of Galilee, at precisely the same place and under the same circumstances that he had met and called them at the outset. These well-crafted literary bookends are compelling, and a further suggestion of intentional literary design.

The Disciples in John 21.2

If the author of *Mark* had originally composed a continuing narrative beyond 16.8, given the author’s penchant for literary symmetry, there is little doubt that the disciples deciding to return home to their fishing trade would have been *Peter, Andrew, James, and John*. The reunion of Jesus with these four in particular, at their boats by the Sea of Galilee, would have been the ideal literary conclusion—the compelling bookends—suggested thus far. Yet “*Peter, Andrew, James, and John by the Sea of Galilee*” would have constituted an obvious Markan signature that would have been entirely incompatible with the *Gospel of John*. In transferring this story to *John*, the editor would have been required to alter this cast of characters to erase the Markan signature, and to make the appendix appear Johannine in origin.

Accordingly, a motive for assembling the odd cast of characters in 21.1–2 comes into view. It appears that the redactor who created John 21 attacked this Markan signature problem with vigor, for he selected a series of names that are either exclusive to or uniquely prominent in the *Gospel of John*. The setting in 21.1 is the Sea of *Tiberias*, a term found in John 6.1 and 6.23, but which does not exist in *Mark*. The dual appellation *Simon Peter* is the typical Johannine reference to Peter. The apostle *Thomas* is prominent in John 20 and he is only “*called the Twin*” (*legomenos didymos*) in John 11.16 and 20.24; this is not a Synoptic reference. *Nathanael* is a character unique to John, as is the town of *Cana*. Remarkably, the redactor has drawn these two elements from unrelated pericopes in sequence to fabricate the character “*Nathanael of Cana in Galilee*,” who is not identified as such in John 1.43–50. This suggests the exceptional degree to which the redactor was striving to assemble distinctive Johannine nomenclature. In the end, he was able to

open the appendix with six references in sequence that are each noteworthy for their conspicuous Johannine pedigree (*Tiberias, Simon Peter, Thomas, legomenos didymos, Nathanael, Cana*). Seen in this light, 21.1–2 reads as a strenuously fabricated “Johannine signature.” Conversely, 21.1–2 makes little sense as a construction by a Johannine redactor who was writing the appendix from scratch, since the *Gospel of John* gives the reader no reason to anticipate that Peter, Thomas, and Nathanael would suddenly become post-resurrection commercial fishermen. The very fact that the disciples have suddenly become fishermen in John 21 reveals the degree to which the *Gospel of Mark* was a formative influence on the creation of John 21. In the end, 21.1–2 becomes coherent as a literary creation once one imagines that the redactor was attempting to erase a Markan signature, and to replace it with a substitute “Johannine signature” as an antithesis to that which would have existed in Mark. Ironically, then, even 21.1–2 may be construed as suggestive evidence that the story in John 21 was drawn from an original Markan creation.

Conclusion

Markan commentators have frequently argued that the *Gospel of Mark* ended at 16.8 by design since the earliest manuscripts end at 16.8, and all other possible explanations for the abrupt ending (e.g., the sudden death/incapacitation of the author, accidental corruption of the autograph or early copy, or the intentional suppression of the original ending due to problematic content) have traditionally been regarded as improbable. Accordingly, scholars have understandably sought to interpret the gospel under the assumption that the author did indeed end purposefully at 16.8.

Nevertheless, many elements of a complex and brilliant literary conclusion to Mark appear to have been preserved under unknown circumstances in John 21. The redactor has, for some reason, retained language from an original composition that the disciples have now become fishermen, and that they did not expect to encounter Jesus as they were fishing (21.4, 12b), suggesting that they may have been unaware of the empty tomb. The disciples’ return to Galilee to take up their fishing profession is far more coherent under the implied premise that they were unaware of the empty tomb, as is made clear in the *Gospel of Peter*. John 21.15–17 constitutes a comprehensive closing bracket to Mark 14.27–30; Peter is forgiven thrice for his denials, Peter is designated the new shepherd to carry forward in the role

of the shepherd struck down, he is to feed the sheep that had scattered, and even the incidental issue of Peter's superior allegiance to Jesus is tacitly addressed. The distraught Jesus in Mark 14.33–35 and the corresponding scene of the grieving disciples unaware of the empty tomb (as paralleled in the *Gospel of Peter*) function as secondary brackets that would have existed in the original composition, completing a formally structured chiasmus defining Section Six that is missing in the canonical text. The miraculous catch of fish, when restored to its original location in the text following 16.8, resolves in dramatic fashion Jesus' promise to make the disciples fishers of men. The first words spoken by Jesus to Peter and Andrew in Mark 1.17 are mirrored by the last words spoken by Jesus to Peter in John 21.19,22. With these elements restored to Mark, the author's creation of an inspiring seventh frame encompassing the entire mission of Jesus comes into view. In consideration of all of this, even the heavy-handed Johannine signature in 21.1–2 reads as an attempt to mask the premise of "*Peter, Andrew, James, and John returning to the Sea of Galilee*" that would have appeared in Mark's original narrative beyond 16.8.

In short, the literary connections between the *Gospel of Mark* and John 21 are precise and extensive. In practical terms, it is simply not possible to imagine that all these elements could have fallen into place by accident. The missing ending of Mark and the addition of the appendix John 21 cannot reasonably be regarded as unrelated literary phenomena. The most intuitively obvious explanation for these data is that the author of Mark did indeed compose a final scene beyond 16.8 in which he concluded the gospel on a resounding note of triumph, that this final scene became separated from Mark under unknown circumstances, and that significant portions of this lost ending were mysteriously preserved by the redactor of John 21. In my view, the essential question that scholars should have been asking all along, is under what heretofore unimagined circumstances could Mark's finale have ended up as an appendix to John? This question will be addressed in the chapters that follow.